

## PICTURES OF NIGHT LIFE OF THE SLUMS OF PANAMA

Among the West Indian Negroes in the City at the Pacific End of Our Canal—White Slaves and Their Treatment—Life Among the Poor.

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Panama City, Panama.

Come with me for a peep under the crust of old Panama of a Saturday night. We shall leave the Tivoli Hotel, where everything is proper and pious, and the fashionable world is dancing, and go off into the by-ways and slums. We want to see the poor of the city, and also take a look at some districts where vice carries on its mad spree until the wee hours of the morning. We shall choose the Saturday that comes after pay day, and shall have abundant reason to say why Uncle Sam should control both Panama and Colon, the two towns at the ends of our ditch.

### In New Caledonia.

We begin our walk in New Caledonia. At the Tivoli the charges are \$5 a day. New Caledonia is only a stone's throw away, but you can get a bed there for 25 cents a night, or you may have a room at \$10 a month and crowd ten other persons inside it. New Caledonia is made up of such rooms. They are filled with Jamaica negroes. A single room will often house a whole family and take in boarders to boot. Some of the best rooms have curtains across them that the females may have privacy while dressing, but as a rule the negroes nest like rabbits in a warren, and dirt reigns supreme.

On Saturday nights these West Indian quarters are alive. There are dances in the saloons, and out in the streets there is the tamboireta, with black and yellow men and women going through motions similar to those of the Gewazi in Egypt. Other negro dances remind me of the Nautch girls of India or the Ouled Nails of the Sahara; and there are some which compare with the hooche-kooche of the South seas. The negroes are dressed in their best and they go through their amorous postures with wild abandon, which is unsurpassed even by the bunny hug or the turkey trot of our wicked New York. They grow more and more noisy as the night goes on and by 12 o'clock the whole of Caledonia is mad. This is on Saturday. It is more quiet on other nights of the week.

### Night Life in Panama City.

Leaving Caledonia we take carriages for a drive through Panama, visiting first the more respectable quarters. The houses here have balconies which run out from the second stories over the streets. The richer people live upstairs and these balconies form the sitting and gossiping places of the better classes during the evenings. In the stories below, where a whole family may have but one room, the people come out on the sidewalks and sit on the doorsteps or curbstones, taking the air. The streets are filled with such figures. They form two long lines of humanity, one on the street and the other on the balconies above.

Some of the people are chatting. Some are playing cards. Here and there the thumping of a piano falls on the ear, and the graphophone with its ruty shriek slaughters the air. The most of the groups on the balconies are family parties. Nice girls are not allowed to have young men courting them, and the lover talks with his sweetheart only in the presence of the family and must do all of his spooning under the eyes of his possible parents-in-law. These scenes, however, are Spanish, and are much the same as those of Spanish cities anywhere in the world.

### A Look at the Slums.

We shall now leave the respectable quarters of Panama and visit those of which vice is the queen. We shall not have to go far, for the wicked sections are in the heart of the city and their signs are so plain they can be read on the run. You have heard of Port Said and Suez, the two bad towns at the ends of the Suez canal. Rudyard Kipling has defined them as the place where the Ten Commandments come to an end.

"Take one somewhere east of Suez,

Where the best is like the worst,  
Where there ain't no Ten Commandments,

And you've not to raise a thirst."

I do not know just how bad Suez is, but you can see more wickedness in a day here than in a week at Port Said. In the cities of the Suez canal the vices are hidden. The streets are quiet, and there are no signs and advertisements to attract the passersby. At Panama the slum quarters are as open as is the Yoshiwara of Japan. One of the worst sections is not far from the cathedral and in the very heart of the city. It is known as the red light district and the light is electricity filtered through glass as crimson as blood. There are great square red lanterns with incandescent bulbs inside them painted with the names



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of the special resorts they represent. Here, for instance, is "Fannie's Place," farther on "The French House," and in the next block is "La Perla de Pacifico," or the Pearl of the Pacific.

Now stop your carriage before one of these gilded houses and take a look through the half-open door. The lower floor at the front is a saloon. You can see the bottles in the bar at the back, while at the windows and in the door looking out upon the streets are little girls with painted faces and gaudy clothes. Most of them are mere children, fifteen, sixteen and seventeen years of age, and they are dressed to look younger. Their skirts reach just to their knees and they look as though they should put on their nightgowns and be tucked away in their beds.

The great majority of these girls are French. They are white slaves, who have been smuggled into Panama through Costa Rica or other Central American ports, and brought down here in boats to Panama Bay in such a way that the jurisdiction of our zone is avoided.

### White Slaves From France.

I went into one of these houses with a policeman, who had a summons to serve upon the matron. She was charged with being a white slave trader and with having brought several girl slaves through the canal zone. I must say that she looked it. She was a brazen-faced French woman of about thirty-five, and in the room with her were half a dozen little chits of from fifteen to seventeen, who were probably the slaves she had smuggled. They could speak but little English, and were French from their toes to their crowns. They danced about the room while we stayed. At the same time other girls of similar ages were flirting with some men on the opposite side of the room, and at the table one drank beer with a Spaniard.

As I looked the policeman said: "These girls are real slaves and they are treated like slaves. They look very gay now in their jewels and fine dresses, but those jewels and dresses they are allowed to use only at night. During the day they put on common clothing, and take care of the house, scrubbing and cleaning. The matron keeps them in debt, and they are so afraid of her that they do not dare to leave."

I don't know how many houses of this kind there are in Panama and Colon, but the number is large, and it is steadily increased by recruits from France and southeastern Europe. The houses are licensed by the two cities. It is claimed that they are under medical supervision, and that the girls are older than they look. I asked one of them whether she had yet passed fifteen. She mockingly replied that she was sixty-five, and danced away, swinging her bare arms around her head and kicking her red, silk-stockinged toe almost to the height of my nose.

The government is doing all it can to restrict the white slave traffic and to reduce the vice of the Panama cities. It has done wonders, and were it not for our influence in such matters things would be worse than they are. I believe that the morality among the white employees of the canal is far better than could be found in such a camp anywhere else. The canal has many good American women and they and the Y. M. C. A. club-houses have done much to build up a high moral tone among the employees.

### In the Opium Dens.

Leaving the red-light section, I visited some of the licensed opium dens. They are managed by the Chinese and are exceedingly rude. The

beds are mere platforms made of boards, running along the sides of narrow halls. Upon these wooden bunks I found men and women lying with opium outfits before them. Some were hitting the pipe and others sleeping off the effects of the drug. Some of the smokers were Colombians, a few were negroes and some were Chinese. I did not see a single American, although I am told that some are to be found among the patrons, and that even American women have come to the joints. I doubt this. I have seen the opium saloons of Shanghai and Canton. They are grand in comparison with these of Panama, but the glazed eyes and dreamy looks of the smokers are the same.

### A City of Caves.

The average visitor to the canal leaves Panama City knowing nothing about it. If you would understand how these people really live you must get inside the houses and examine the caves which form the homes of the poor.

Panama is a queer city. It is one in which a hundred or more families have all the money, and where the remaining thousands earn only enough to keep soul and body together. The average family of the lower classes sleeps in a cave on the first floor; or if on the second, it is over a store and the whole family will have but one room. There are thousands of families here, each of which has only one room and this is so small that the cooking is done in a common hall outside it. The kitchen stove is a pot of charcoal put inside a box to keep off the wind, the box being nailed to the fence or post of the veranda.

Most of these cave-homes have no windows, being ventilated by an opening which runs around the tops of the walls under the ceiling. There is no plaster nor paper. The walls are of boards, painted or not, as the landlord may order.

I am having my films developed by a photographer here whose studio is at the top of a three-story frame building. He tells me that there are more than a thousand men, women and children in his building and that there are altogether something like two or three hundred rooms, each housing a family.

I have looked into some of the rooms. They are as dark as a pocket and the smoke from the cooking in the halls outside has turned their walls black. Some of the rooms are about ten feet square. They have no ventilation except at the doors.

That building is a fire trap. It is all wood excepting the roof, which is of galvanized iron. I tremble at the possible loss in case of a fire.

I asked my photographer as to the rents, and was told that they are from \$7 to \$10 per room per month in gold. Similar rates prevail in the Jamaica negro quarters in New Caledonia, which I described at the beginning of this letter. The rents are here so high and the building so cheap that many structures pay in rents every year the cost of the land and the building. This is likewise so in Colon. There is one caravansary known as the Coal Chute, which has 100 rooms. It is said to have paid the cost of its erection within fourteen months.

### The Cave Stores of Panama.

It is interesting to look at the cave stores of the isthmus. They are mere holes in the wall about ten feet square and perhaps eight feet in height. They have no windows, facing the street, and the door alone gives the light. Often one of these little store-rooms will be the home of the family which keeps it. It is a store or workshop in the daytime and a sleeping place after dark.

As to work, the idea prevails at home that these Panamanians are lazy. I do not find them so. Some kind of house industry is going on everywhere. In one little shop shoemakers will be pounding away. In another the women and girls are making lace, while farther on are cigarmakers, carpenters and blacksmiths. Much of the work is done out on the sidewalks. I see many women sewing on the edge of the street, and the tailors bring their chairs out to the roadway and stitch in the sun. The most common store is the petty saloon. Drinks are sold everywhere, and there are scores of fruit stores and groceries.

### The Lottery Business.

There is one thing which employs more people in Panama City perhaps than any other, and that is the lottery. Its tickets are sold by men, women and children on every block of Panama and Colon. It is against the law to sell them on our Canal Zone, but the lottery peddlers roost about the railroad stations and accost the workmen as they pass through. They do a great business with the negroes and not a little with the Americans. The grand prize is \$15,000 in silver, and in addition there is \$17,000 of other prizes. The grand prize has been drawn several times by Americans, but in most cases it has done little good, the money being spent in riotous living.

The Panama lottery belongs to a man named Gabriel Duque, a naturalized American who came here from Cuba. He owns also the Star and Herald, one of the chief newspapers of the isthmus, and he is, I am told, a man of wealth. He pays the Panama republic for the license to run the lottery, and his profits from it amount to something like \$50,000 a year. The drawings are held every

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Sunday, and a little girl picks out the balls containing the blanks and the prizes. This lottery is a great evil to Panama and the drain of it is mostly on the poor, who buy tickets and parts of tickets, even when they must go hungry in consequence.

### Bull-fights.

Panama has a building outside the city and bull-fights take place every Sunday whenever there are any bull-fighters here on their way from Spain to Lima, Peru, or Mexico City. The bulls, however, are not dangerous, and the sport is usually a fraud and a farce. I have seen some of these fights, and at one time watched a score of Panama boys rush into the ring and have a hand-to-hand fight with the bull. This was to get a ten-dollar gold piece which had been tied to the horns of the bull. Each man had a red blanket, which he tried to throw over the bull's eyes, in order that he might grab at the gold. Several of the boys were badly injured, but one of them finally got the ten dollars.

### Changes in Panama.

In the meantime, notwithstanding these blots upon its escutcheon, Panama City is far better off than it has been in the past. I first visited it in 1898, fourteen years ago, when on my way around South America. The city was then one of vile smells. It had no sewerage, and the walls and cesspools were side by side in the courts. Business was dead, and the barefooted cabmen slept in their shabby old coaches. Today the town is alive. It has modern improvements. It has water works and all sanitary conveniences. Outside the lottery peddlers there are no beggars whatever. Every one of the better classes rides about in carriages, and they are victorias for hire at every street corner which will take you on the trot or the lope from one part of the town to the other. These victorias have dinner gongs underneath at the front, so that they can be rung by the foot of the driver, and there is a continual beeping going on.

It was during my second visit here that Uncle Sam took hold of Panama and made it sanitary. He dug up the streets, put in sewers and a water supply and paved the main streets with vitrified brick. He did the same with Colon, and you will not find two towns in the tropics which have as good streets as these.

Both places are growing. There are new houses on almost every block, and the Avenida Central, which runs from the plaza to the railroad station, at the end of Ancon, is lined with houses and stores all the way. They are Panama stores, and some of them carry large stocks of goods. They are nothing like our business establishments, and some are more like the general store which you find at a country cross-roads or in villages.

In the center of Panama are many fine buildings. The National Palace and theater cost something like three-quarters of a million dollars, and the Panamanians will tell you that the theater is the finest in the world. This is doubtful. Nevertheless, it has sitting and standing room for 1,600, and a fireproof metal drop curtain which is wonderfully made. The new city hall, facing the plaza, not far from the cathedral, is another large building, and a third is the national institute, devoted to education. The institute cost a million pesos or more, and it will, in time, develop into a university. At present it has about 300 students, ranging from those of the kindergarten to those in the college. These buildings are only a part of what the country has to show for the \$10,000,000 it received from Uncle Sam at the time of the settlement as to the Panama canal.

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### AN INSIDE QUESTION.

"How high can a man fly?" asks a scientist. That depends on his capacity for highballs.—Memphis Commercial-Appeal.